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ABSTRACT

Information regarding state minimum competency testing programs was requested from the 50 state departments of education in the United States in the spring of 1979. The following questions were asked: (1) Do you have a testing program? (2) If you do, what tests are being used? (3) Do you have a testing program in the planning stages? (4) Are there publications describing your program? and (5) How can sample copies of your state's tests be acquired? Responses were received from 41 states; the sample tests and supporting materials which were contributed have been placed in the Curriculum Library, Clement C. Maxwell Library, Bridgewater State College, Bridgewater, Massachusetts. Twenty states reported existing competency testing programs, and 15 reported programs in the planning stage. (Eight pages of this document provide one-paragraph summaries of the testing programs and policies in the following states: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, and Wyoming.) (GDC)

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STATE MINIMUM COMPETENCY TESTING
A SURVEY

by
Robert M. Simmons

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STATE MINIMUM COMPETENCY TESTING

The Need for Information.

In recent years, national standardized test scores have shown a steady decline, particularly in the area of basic skills. There have been horror stories in the press indicating that significant numbers of high school graduates are both illiterate and unable to perform simple everyday tasks such as balancing check books, figuring taxes and filling out forms. In response to this trend, educators in many states have initiated minimum competency testing as a means of upgrading performance in basic skills. Such programs take many forms and are subject to many variables. At the present there is a great need for detailed information about this phenomenon, yet the competency testing movement is so new that insufficient data is available; hence, the need for this survey.

Objectives.

The purpose of this survey was to collect up-to-date information regarding the status of minimum competency testing in each of the fifty states. Toward this end, a letter was sent to every state department of education in the spring of 1979 requesting the following information:

(1.) Does your state currently have a competency testing program?

(2.) If competency testing is now in effect, what test(s) is being used?

(3.) If competency testing is not in effect, do you have a program in the planning stages?

(4.) Please forward any publications you might have describing your program.

(5.) Please forward or provide information on how we might acquire sample copies of your state test.

In general, the results of the survey were good both in terms of the number of states which responded and the amount of documentary material we received as a result of our mailing.

Summary of Results.

Responses were received from 41 of the 50 states queried. Most of those who replied included a cover letter and various relevant publications, although the information provided was not always complete enough to give a full description of the program in question. Reactions to minimum competency testing ranged from enthusiastic support to disapproval; however, most states either have a program in place or are moving in that direction. The programs described took many different forms. Some used a single state-wide test, while others allowed for locally selected or devised instruments. States differed as to whether promotion and graduation were contingent upon achieving a passing grade. Some states issue special diplomas or certificates of attendance to students who fail. Many states with competency requirements make special provisions or exceptions for handicapped and non-English speaking children. The main thrust of assessment in several states was curriculum improvement and diagnosing student problems so that remedial aid could be administered. A few states made a point of indicating that the assessments were not to be used to evaluate teacher performance. Specific references to these variables will be made in the statistical and informational

summaries which follow.

Among the states which responded, many sent a letter describing their situations. These have been compiled in the Minimum Competency Testing Resource Directory, on reserve in the Curriculum Library. Brief supporting documents were also included in the Resource Directory; however, larger items were placed in the Curriculum Library Vertical File under the heading, "Education -- Standards". A few states obliged by sending samples of their test instruments; these have been added to the Curriculum Library Test File. Locations for support documents are noted in the state-by-state informational summary.

Statistical Summary.

No. of states queried.....50
No. of states responding.....41

Note. The statistics given below should not be regarded as absolutes, but rather as confirmed minimums, since some states did not respond, and among those that did respond, the information was not always complete enough to make judgments in all categories.

States reporting....
- competency testing programs in place.....20
- programs in the planning stages.....15
- programs with a single state-wide test.....16
- programs with a local option test.....16
- test passage as a graduation requirement.....7
- test passage not a graduation requirement.....15
- provisions for handicapped and/or non-English speaking students.....6
- no competency testing program (either planned or in place).....5
- assessment programs not intended as competency measures.....3

Informational Summary.

ALABAMA. A pilot minimal competency program is now in effect in seven school systems. Remediation is being applied to students who do not pass. Many issues are yet to be resolved, including whether or not to use the test as a requirement for graduation. An untitled pamphlet is available in the Resource Directory.

ALASKA. The Department of Education is working with local school districts to develop guidelines for optional local programs. The state's role is informational. The decision to proceed is a local district option.

ARIZONA. The State Board requires that each student attain at least a 6th grade competency in reading, computational and written communicative skills, prior to receiving the 8th grade certificate of promotion. Also, each student must read at a 9th grade level prior to graduation from high school. However, a Special Education Certificate of Promotion is provided for students with physical or mental deficiencies which prevent attainment of minimum competencies. See the Resource Directory for "State Board of Education Policies on Proficiency" and "A.R.S. 15-102.26-CUES Mandate". See the Vertical File for "Suggested Guidelines for the Development and Implementation of a Continuous Uniform Evaluation System".

ARKANSAS. Legislation has been passed "...to establish a state-wide assessment program". Among the goals of the program are to measure pupil performance in basic subjects, to provide data concerning strengths and weaknesses of instructional programs of various school districts, and to provide teachers with diagnostic information. Implementation of the act is in the planning stage. See the Resource Directory for a copy of the bill.

CALIFORNIA. Through legislation passed in 1976 and 1977, California requires local school districts to establish proficiency standards for grades K-12. These standards include but are not limited to the basic skills. After June 1980, any student who has not met local standards shall not receive a diploma of graduation from high school. See the Resource Directory for "Legal Requirements for Proficiency Standards and their Effect on School Districts", and an untitled descriptive pamphlet.

COLORADO. Does not now have any prescribed state achievement tests, graduation requirements or minimal competencies. However, the State Educational Accountability Act (1971) requires local districts to develop evaluation programs to improve education. There is also a law which requires that if a district has a test requirement for graduation, testing must begin in the 9th grade. There has been discussion in the state legislature on testing and competencies, but no legislation has yet resulted.

CONNECTICUT. The Educational Evaluation and Remedial Assistance Act (effective July 1, 1978) requires, among other things, that by September 1, 1979 each local system submit for state board approval a plan of educational evaluation and remedial assistance; and that annually after September 1, 1979 all 9th grade students shall take a state-wide proficiency exam. See the Resource Directory for copies of the legislation.

DELAWARE. No response.

FLORIDA. A Statewide Assessment Program has been in existence for several years, and this was supplemented by the Educational Accountability Act of 1976. Students are now tested for minimal competencies in communication and mathematics skills in grades 3, 5, 8 and 11. If a student does not demonstrate the required mastery, a certificate of completion is awarded in lieu of a regular high school diploma. For various descriptive pamphlets see the Resource Directory and the Vertical File.

GEORGIA. Information provided not relevant.

HAWAII. A program has just begun which utilizes the "Hawaii State Test of Essential Competencies" (HSTEC), developed by the Educational Testing Service. The test is administered to all 10th graders to measure student attainment of essential competencies for graduation. Those who fail are provided additional assistance and are given opportunities to retake the test. Competency tests for grades 3, 6, 8 and 10 are in the developmental stages. See the Resource Directory for a list of "Essential Competencies for Graduation".

IDAHO. An optional program utilizing tests developed and administered through the state department of education is available to local school districts. The tests are administered beginning in the 9th grade to determine qualifications for graduation. Students who fail are provided remedial and/or tutorial services. Students who pass are recognized with the State Board of Education seal on their diplomas. No student will be denied a certificate of attendance or diploma for failure to pass. See the Resource Directory for the following publications: "State Board Policy on Proficiency Testing", "Guidelines for Administering Idaho's Proficiency Testing" and "Objectives for Reading, Math, Writing and Spelling".

ILLINOIS. No response.

INDIANA. Effective June 7, 1978, Indiana adopted the Comprehensive Assessment and Program Planning System. Under its provisions, each school corporation recommends local standards of performance and evaluates its students each year. Each school system has the option of using test scores as a local graduation

requirement. Tests may be locally developed or commercially prepared. Handicapped and non-English speaking students are exempted. See the Vertical File for a booklet entitled, "Indiana Comprehensive Assessment and Program Planning System", which contains state guidelines.

IOWA. Has no state mandated testing program, and has no plans to get into competency testing from the state level. The Iowa Code stipulates that all program evaluation be handled at the local level. See the Resource Directory for the pertinent section of the Iowa Code.

KANSAS. The Kansas Competency Based Education Pilot Program is in its final stages of development. Under its provisions, students will be tested in grades 2, 4, 6, 8 and 11 for minimum competencies in reading and mathematics. See the Resource Directory for a memorandum which describes the objectives of the pilot program. A brochure is available in the Vertical File.

KENTUCKY. The Educational Improvement Act of 1978 provides that the CTBS Form S, Standardized Achievement Test will be administered to all students in grades 3, 5, 7 and 10. This will primarily be used as a screening instrument. It will be followed in the fall by a diagnostic instrument to be administered to all of those students who have been identified as not having mastery of basic skills. The main thrust of this effort is to develop remedial programs to meet the needs of students in the basic skills. See the Vertical File for a publication entitled the "Educational Improvement Manual", which describes the guidelines and procedures of the legislation.

LOUISIANA. The Louisiana State Assessment Program was implemented in 1977. All public school students in grades 4, 8 and 11 are tested in reading, mathematics and writing. The assessment instruments are designed to measure minimum standards however, the present program is not tied to promotion or graduation. See the Vertical File for a copy of the legislation and a guide to the minimum standards.

MAINE. The Maine Assessment of Basic Skills studied the performance of all 11th graders and a sampling of 8th graders in the areas of reading, writing and mathematics, during the 1977/78 school year. In addition, through public hearings and a public opinion survey, the feelings of Maine residents on the subject of competency requirements were determined. One recommendation of the commission which conducted the program was that the legislature not establish state-wide competency requirements as a prerequisite for a high school diploma. See the Test File under "Maine Assessment of Basic Skills" for more information.

MARYLAND. The Maryland State Board of Education has authorized by 1982 the development and implementation of competency-based prerequisites for graduation. Minimum competency performance will be measured in five areas: basic skills, survival skills, world of work, world of leisure and citizenship. See the Vertical File for two pamphlets describing "Project Basic".

MASSACHUSETTS. In August 1978, the State Board of Education issued a policy statement on basic skills improvement which included the following provisions: local school committees have the responsibility for establishing minimum standards by September 1980; local school committees have the responsibility to decide which evaluative instruments will be used at the elementary level, but at the secondary level they must select either a state developed test, a commercial test approved by the state, or a locally developed test approved by the state. The main thrust is to diagnose student needs and to identify curriculum areas which should be improved; the purpose is not to establish a new condition for promotion or graduation. Special provisions are made for handicapped and bilingual students. See the Vertical File for descriptive pamphlets.

MICHIGAN. The Michigan Educational Assessment Program was started in 1969. The program tests minimum objectives in reading and mathematics at 4th and 7th grades. In addition, a voluntary program is in effect at 10th grade measuring the same two areas. The main objectives of the program are diagnosis of student deficiencies and curriculum improvement. See the Test File under "Michigan Educational Assessment Program" for relevant documents.

MINNESOTA. On March 12, 1979 the State Board of Education adopted the following policy, "...the State Board of Education encourages each local district to develop and adopt, through planning, evaluating, and reporting (PER), its own plan for setting standards and establishing criteria for determining when those standards have been met". See the Resource Directory for the complete policy statement.

MISSISSIPPI. No response.

MISSOURI. No response.

MONTANA. The Montana School Testing Service is a voluntary program offered by the Office of Public Instruction to assist school personnel in program evaluation. The purpose of the program is to evaluate and improve local curriculums; it does not involve itself with pupil diagnosis or graduation requirements. See the Resource Directory for an explanatory sheet; see also the Test File under "Montana Educational Assessment Program".

NEBRASKA. Schools in Nebraska are required to use a competency measure which assesses mastery of minimum acceptable performance in reading, writing and arithmetic skills. In May 1977, the Nebraska State Board of Education approved a motion recommending that schools place greater emphasis on the basics, and reaffirming provisions relating to instruction and assessment of basic skills. Most schools in the state use the "Nebraska Assessment Battery of Essential Learning Skills" (N-ABELS). See the Test File for a copy of this instrument.

NEVADA. No response.

NEW HAMPSHIRE. No response.

NEW JERSEY. As a result of the New Jersey Minimum Standards Amendment passed in 1976, all students in grades 3, 6, 9 and 11 are tested in the areas of reading and mathematics. The tests assess minimal competencies and are devised to identify learning strengths and weaknesses. Special education and limited English speaking ability students are exempted. Students performing below the state-wide minimum standard must receive remedial assistance. For a relevant document see the Test File under "New Jersey Educational Assessment Program...".

NEW MEXICO. The New Mexico Basic Skills Plan requires that all students be tested at the 10th grade level in the attainment of basic skills, based on a set of exit competencies. Students who are unable to demonstrate competency after appropriate remediation, receive a regular diploma signifying completion of course work. Students who meet the minimum requirements will receive diplomas with statements of competency. See the Test File for the "New Mexico High School Proficiency Examination Procedures Manual" and the Vertical File for a descriptive pamphlet.

NEW YORK. The Regents Competency Testing Program has two purposes: (1) to assure the early identification and subsequent monitoring of students who need special help in reading comprehension, writing, and mathematics; and (2) to assure that students have acquired adequate competence in those subjects before graduation from high school. Students must pass the Regents examinations in order to receive a Regents high school diploma. See the Resource Directory for a descriptive leaflet, and see the Test File under the title, "New York (State): Regents Competency Testing Program".

NORTH CAROLINA. The North Carolina requirements demand that students must attain a passing score on a competency test supplied by the State Department of Public Instruction in order to be graduated. The test is administered annually in the fall to all 11th grade students. Students who fail receive remedial instruction and additional opportunities to take the test. Modified procedures are used for special and exceptional students. See the Resource Directory for a relevant leaflet.

NORTH DAKOTA. Does not have a competency testing program, and, at the present, does not have a program in the planning stages.

OHIO. There is no requirement for competency testing in Ohio at this time. The General Assembly is now considering two legislative proposals. One would require the state to develop a test for promotion and high school graduation. The second would permit local school districts to develop their own competency testing. In anticipation of the possibility of competency testing, the State Department has prepared a handbook to assist school personnel. See the Vertical File for a copy of this publication.

OKLAHOMA. At the present time, Oklahoma does not have a state-wide competency testing program. However, the State Department of Education has conducted two random sample surveys of students in grades 3, 6, 9 and 12 to determine their achievement level in the areas of reading and math. The "California Achievement Test" was used for grades 3, 6 and 9; and the "SHARP" test was used for grade 12. See the Vertical File for a copy of the survey results.

OREGON. High school graduation requirements in Oregon are based on successful completion of attendance, credit, and competency requirements. State standards leave it to each district to specify and measure their particular graduation competencies. Measurement procedures at this time typically utilize teacher judgment and not formal written competency tests. Oregon does not at this time have state adopted/mandated minimum competencies nor state measures of these. See the Resource Directory for a letter containing more details.

PENNSYLVANIA. Pennsylvania currently does not have a competency testing program. The state is engaged in an assessment program known as Project 81, which is investigating with twelve pilot school districts the development of competency statements, their merit, and in time, their measurement. See the Vertical File for documents relating to Project 81 and the Educational Quality Assessment program.

RHODE ISLAND. During the 1978 legislative session, a bill which would have tied high school graduation to successful performance on a state competency test was not reported out of committee. The Commissioner, also, has recommended against a competency-based diploma policy. The State Board of Regents, instead has approved a policy of state-wide standards and measurement of performance of educational achievement. See the Resource Directory for more details.

SOUTH CAROLINA. The 1978 session of the South Carolina General Assembly enacted legislation mandating the establishment of a basic skills assessment program. The legislation provides for state-wide educational objectives

with minimum standards of achievement for grades K-12; use of data for program assessment and determining what high school credentials are to be awarded students not meeting minimum standards. A separate testing program and special diplomas are to be developed for handicapped students. See the Resource Directory for a copy of the legislation.

SOUTH DAKOTA. The State Department does not support nor advocate a single test to be used for promotion or to determine whether a student shall receive a high school diploma. Consequently, South Dakota does not have a competency testing program. Local school districts assess their students with norm-referenced achievement tests, IQ tests, interest and aptitude tests, and in a couple of districts with locally developed competency tests. The state is in the process of developing standards, K-12, and after the adoption of the standards, commercially produced tests will be used to assess the progress of students towards these standards. See the Resource Directory for more information.

TENNESSEE. No response.

TEXAS. Texas does not currently have a state-wide competency testing program. Each local school district has the option of conducting its own competency tests. However, the Texas Assessment Project (TAP) is now in effect. TAP does not influence promotion or graduation, but it does collect state-wide information on essential learnings. There are several legislative proposals now being considered which would implement competency testing in Texas. See the Vertical File for a summary of these bills and for information on the Texas Assessment Project.

UTAH. The state of Utah will implement a minimal competency testing program during the school year 1979-80. Graduates of the 1980 class must pass the test as one condition for graduation. The State Board of Education placed the responsibility for developing minimal competency objectives and performances with each local board of education. Some have developed their own evaluation programs, while others are using nationally developed tests. See the Vertical File for relevant documents.

VERMONT. In 1977 Vermont instituted a Basic Competency Program. The plan requires no state-wide tests; each school district is expected to produce its own assessment materials in keeping with a manual produced by the State Department. Local school districts are advised to use data obtained to evaluate their school programs and not for purposes of teacher evaluation. There is no requirement that the tests be used to determine promotion or graduation. See the Vertical File for the state manual.

VIRGINIA. Currently has a competency testing program in effect which uses commercially prepared reading and mathematics tests. According to legislative mandate, no child can obtain a diploma from an accredited high school in Virginia after January 1, 1981, without passing tests prescribed by the State Board of Education. See the Test File for a sample copy of the state test.

WASHINGTON (STATE). Washington does not now have a competency testing program in effect or in the planning stages. State law does require an annual test of fourth grade basic skills achievement -- the Washington Statewide Educational Assessment. The instrument used is the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills. The main objective is program evaluation.

WEST VIRGINIA. No response.

WISCONSIN. No response.

WYOMING. Wyoming does not have a state-wide competency testing program, nor are there any plans to establish one. However, the State Board of Education is in the process of requiring that all public high school graduates possess certain minimum competencies in the areas of reading, writing, math and civics. Under this plan, school districts will be responsible for verification of the above competencies, before awarding diplomas. Districts will be free to decide what evaluative tools to use, including commercially prepared tests. See the Resource Directory for more information.